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ABSTRACT

The paper presents the thesis that mild mental subnormality developed as a "scientific," hence natural, explanation for the socially unacceptable behavior of economically marginal persons. The history of such labels as "moron," "imbecile," and "moral imbecile" is traced to the late 19th century emphasis on biology and genetics in human affairs. This focus led to the belief that criminal behavior was caused by mental deficiency and thus provided justification for massive institutionalization of people who did not meet societal expectations. The development of intelligence tests led to what was considered a scientific method of identifying the feebleminded. The need for manpower in World War II resulted in the discovery that many "feebleminded" persons could perform at higher levels than had previously been thought and some special educators credited special education with the new competence of the feebleminded. After the war new classification systems evolved based on social competence. Definitions of mental retardation by the American Association on Mental Deficiency included the construct of "adaptive behavior" which was difficult to measure reliably. Despite current confusion regarding definition, the mildly retarded of today are still drawn from economically marginal backgrounds. Thus mild mental subnormality continues to be as much a political as a scientific issue. A six-page reference list concludes the document. (DB)

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The Social Construction of Educable Mental Retardation

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From Moral Imbecility to Maladaptive Behavior:

The Social Construction of Educable Mental Retardation

In 1910 Henry Goddard introduced the term "moron" into the American vocabulary and with it the idea that intelligence tests could identify mentally deficient individuals who might otherwise pass for normal. Workers at the time thought that Goddard had done something far more important than introducing a new diagnostic technique. They believed that, through use of the new method, a previously unrecognized mental deficiency had been identified. According to Fernald (1924) "Goddard not only named the moron but he discovered him, for in the pre-Binet days the 9, 10 and 11 mental defective with an Intelligence Quotient of 60, 65 and 70 was seldom recognized as being feebleminded" (p. 213).

But did the "discovery" of the moron break new ground, or simply provide a new label for persons whose deviance had previously been explained in other ways? This paper develops the thesis, previously advanced by the Braginskys (Braginsky & Braginsky, 1971) that mild mental subnormality developed as a "scientific", hence natural, explanation for the socially unacceptable behavior of economically marginal persons. The Binet classification used by Goddard was grafted onto an older tradition of identification that was built upon social judgments.

More than seventy five years later, the term moron is no longer used scientifically, although it has taken on a popular life of its own. Instead, the condition of mild subnormality

which Goddard was credited with discovering is called educable mental retardation (EMR). But despite the passage of time, consensus on the nature or even objective existence of this condition has not been established. From its roots in nineteenth century conceptions of moral impairment to modern elaborations of the construct of adaptive behavior, judgments about mild mental subnormality have been related to wider social and political issues in American culture.

The moral imbecile

As many authors have noted, the publication of Charles Darwin's Origin of Species strongly influenced nineteenth century ideas about the causes of human behavior and social conditions (Haller, 1963; Ludmerer, 1972). Natural selection was seen to be responsible for a host of physical and social problems that had previously not been causally linked together. Not only physical impairment and disease but also poverty and crime became presumptive evidence of organic deficiency. The reasoning in regard to poverty and social class progressed as follows:

1. Organically impaired persons are genetically unfit to compete in the struggle for survival.
2. The poor have not fared well in the struggle for survival, therefore they too are genetically unfit.
3. Since the poor are genetically unfit, they are organically impaired individuals.
4. Poor people are implicated in most social problems.

5. Social problems are caused by the organic impairments of poor people.

Thus by 1912, an authority such as Fernald could declare that "pauperism of two or more generations of the same family, generally means hereditary feeble-mindedness...[and that] feeble-mindedness is the mother of crime, pauperism and degeneracy (pp. 91-92)."

The new emphasis on biology and heredity in human affairs channeled concerns that were initially focused on morality into the area of biological fitness and finally that of mental competence. The process is illustrated by the treatment over time of Dugdale's (1877) famous genealogy of the Jukes family. Dugdale showed that the social deviance of this family had persisted over many generations, but noted that only one of the family members whom he had studied appeared to be mentally deficient. Three decades later a host of similar genealogies were published which emphasized the hereditary transmission of social deviance through mental deficiency. The Jukes family was then reanalyzed and one-half of their members were now seen to be feeble-minded (Estabrook, 1915). As Davies (1930) noted "what was regarded in 1877 as primarily a problem of criminal degeneracy, became in 1915 a problem of mental deficiency" (p. 78).

The criminally social deviant in the late nineteenth century might have been labeled "morally insane", a "moral imbecile" or "criminal imbecile", a "defective delinquent",

"constitutionally immoral", or of "constitutional inferiority " (Wallin, 1924). Of these classifications moral imbecility was most widely used, having for two decades been codified in British law as well as receiving widespread usage on this side of the Atlantic (Young, 1916). A 1913 licensing exam for New York City teachers of ungraded classes required applicants to "define moral defective" and, at a later point in the exam, to define "moral imbecile" (Goddard, 1915, pp. 87-88). As late as 1920 the classification was accorded an entire chapter in an important American medical text on mental deficiency (Barr and Maloney, 1920).

The moral imbecile was held responsible for a host of social ills . Alcoholics, vagrants, prostitutes and chronic criminals were described as groups that were predominantly constituted of moral imbeciles (Kerlin, 1887; Prince, 1906). Some lumped together the insane, the mentally deficient and criminals as individuals who were essentially interchangeable and who suffered from the same underlying problem, namely, the absence of a functioning moral faculty (Broomall, 1887). The moral imbecile was also seen as having a propensity for being easily influenced for evil purposes by persons of stronger mentality (Broomall, 1887; Esten, 1900).

Moral imbecility was applied broadly to persons exhibiting deviant behavior both in the presence and absence of other signs of disability. At times the defect was described as pervading all mental functions and at other times it was seen as very

specific, being analagous, for example, to a lack of musical ability, or color blindness (Kerlin, 1887). Because of this ambiguity the category subsumed obviously handicapped individuals as well as those whose only sign of disability was anti-social behavior. It was usually used however, to describe persons who would not ordinarily have been considered mentally deficient. In this way the classification institutionalized the blurring of the distinction between organic disability and social deviance which marked the popular thought of the time.

Thus, the high grade moral imbecile could demonstrate remarkable competence without posing a contradiction to the classification scheme (Bruce, 1909). Carson (1887) described a girl who performed well in school and whose "intellectual weakness" could be adduced only from a "previous knowledge of her history" (p. 409) A fairly typical case study illustrates how socially maladaptive behavior, in itself, had become presumptive evidence of mental incompetence:

> [H.] has an excellent memory, reads and writes well, but his reasoning powers are as limited as those of a small child. He is a liar, a sexual pervert, very dishonest, revengeful, most vulgar and profane; but has a pleasing personality...He learned all the common branches in school and to play the saxophone. He went to work in a mill, where, one of the foremen having displeased him, he deliberately disorganized some of the machinery so as to stop everything, and for three

> days they were unable to properly readjust it in order to resume work." (p. 98).

The behavior that an earlier generation might have blamed on bad character or moral laxity (not the same as moral imbecility) now indicated the existence of a cognitive defect, a specific, limited type of feeble-mindedness. Tredgold (1949) made this point explicitly in defending the classification:

> The psychological concept of moral deficiency, therefore, is that of an individual who differs from the ordinary type of defectives in that he is neither illiterate, deficient in his range of general knowledge, nor lacking in ordinary understanding; but is defective in common sense or wisdom and in moral sense, and is at the same time possessed of strongly marked anti-social instinctive impulses. It is necessary to emphasize, however, that such a person is <u>mentally</u> defective. He is, in fact, feeble-minded according to the definition; and if magistrates were more enlightened than many of them at present are, moral defectives could be certified as feeble-minded and the term "moral deficiency" discarded. (p. 328, emphasis in the original).

The overwhelming majority of the moral imbeciles described in the case histories of the time were persons drawn from the lowest social class (Barr and Maloney, 1920; Fernald, 1909). These histories are replete with children who came from

tuburcular, unemployed, criminal or unknown parentage. The parents of moral imbeciles who had jobs generally worked in unskilled labor. Only two of thirty eight moral imbeciles described by Barr and Maloney (1920) appeared to come from adequate homes.

The widespread belief that criminal behavior was caused by mental deficiency resulted in a tendency for courts to commit to institutions for the feeble-mindend persons involved in criminal activities. Fernald (1909) noted that for many inmates "the principal reason for institution treatment is the failure to harmonize with the environment as shown by low tastes and associates" (p. 16). Other frequent reasons for referral were "general incorrigibility, purposeless and needless lying...[and] a tendency to petty stealing" (p. 16).

It proved difficult, however, to keep many of the new inmates in the institutions. Fernald complained that only those who worked closely with the feeble-minded were aware of fine shadings of mental deficiency. Other physicians were likely to view the moral or criminal imbecile as one who ought not to be committed to a facility for the feeble-minded. While the courts recommended that more criminals go to institutions they did not always accept the notion of moral defect. Many inmates were released under court order after they had been committed (Discussion, 1906; Fernald, 1909). Fernald (Discussion, 1906) believed that workers at institutions were "ahead of public sentiment and ahead of formulated, scientific descriptions of

moral defect." Superintendents believed that the criminals committed to them were actually mental defective and were frustrated by their inability to show this scientifically. This situation made the development of a reliable and more defensible classification of feeble-mindedness imperative.

As workers recognized the difficulty of having courts distinguish between moral and mental weakness, they became increasingly critical of the idea of moral imbecility as it was applied to persons with supposedly sound intellect but defective moral faculty. They began to argue that moral imbecility did not exist in the absence of other intellectual defects and that the moral imbecile was an imbecile first (Fernald, 1909; Healy, 1915; Wallin, 1924). Goddard, for example, (Discussion, 1909) criticized the older notion of separate moral and mental faculties as an outmoded one that belonged more properly to the middle ages.

The moron

It was within this context that Goddard travelled to Europe, discovered the Binet test and began to experiment with it after his return to the U. S. In 1909, satisfied with its usefulness, Goddard proposed a new tripartite classification system based on the one that had been elaborated by Binet. The lowest grade of mental defectives were to be called idiots, the middle grade imbeciles and the highest grade feeble-minded (Goddard, 1909). The first two terms were translations of the French terms used by Binet and Simon, but the third,

"feeble-minded" was not. For the highest grade group the French psychologists had used the term "debile" which was more difficult to translate directly into English (Binet and Simon, 1908).

In 1910 Goddard reported the results of his administration of the Binet test to 400 inmates of the Vineland Training School and defined in more detail the classification system that he had first elaborated the previous year (Goddard, 1910). This time, however, he substituted the new term "moron" for feeble-minded to describe mental deficients of the highest grade. In doing so he grafted the Anglo-American ideas about moral imbecility onto the classification system he had adapted from Binet. The moron incorporated many of the features of the moral imbecile.

The new name was derived from a Greek word meaning foolish, but it is possible that Goddard was influenced subconciously in his choice by the fact that the new word began with the same first three letters as the word "moral." He was convinced, as were most social scientists of the time, that social problems were caused by hereditary mental deficients and that the highest grade were the most dangerous (Blanton, 1975; Chase, 1976; Haller, 1980). Thus Goddard describe morons as constituting a large percentage of social deviants including criminals, paupers, alcoholics, truants, "ne'er-do-wells", prostitutes and victims of the "white slave traffic" and even non-English speakers (Goddard, 1914; 1915). It is also significant that Goddard was partially motivated to create the special name so

that the public, which he deemed "entirely ignorant of this group" (1910, p. 27), might be alerted to the social danger it presented.

Just as writers on moral imbecility stressed how easily the high grade case might disguise itself and go unrecognized (Barr and Maloney, 1920), Goddard stated that the real danger of morons was that they were so hard to identify and often found in positions in which they could do a great deal of harm (Goddard 1910). This concern soon became a national one. The difficulty in identifying the moron became a special concern for inspectors at Ellis Island who examined would-be immigrants for signs of mental disability.

The physicians' concerns indicate the extent to which ideas about the moral imbecile had been transferred to the moron. Only three years after Goddard had named the moron, a physician stationed at Ellis Island wrote in the Journal of the American Medical Association that:

> There is one great class of defectives of tremendous importance from a eugenic, social and economic point of view that is not ordinarily recognized by laymen as defectives. This class comprises the morons and constitutional inferior types...The two have in common latent or undeveloped moral tone, limited ability for coordinated and consecutive mental effort, erratic judgment and

> inability to compete unaided in the struggle for existence. (Knox, 1913, p. 105, emphasis added).

That Goddard was a sloppy scientist is, by know, well known (Popplestone and McPherson 1984; Smith, 1985). His classic work on the Kallikak family has long been disregarded as legitimate science (Smith, 1985), but his more enduring contribution, the discovery of the moron (now the educable mental retardate) has been accepted as legitimate, based upon an appropriate application of the Binet scales (Terman, 1916; Fernald, 1924; Scheerenberger, 1983). A close scrutiny of Goddard's data and methods indicate, however, that the discovery of the moron was, as the discovery of the Kallikak family, seriously flawed and socially constructed.

As mentioned earlier, the morons Goddard first described in were inmates of the Vineland Training School for the Feeble-minded where he was employed as the director of research (Goddard, 1910). After Goddard administered his unstandardized translation of the Binet test to all 400 inmates he classified those who scored between one and two years idiots, those between three and seven years imbeciles, and those scoring between eight and twelve years morons. But Goddard's test was not valid for the group he was using it on. As Terman later discovered when developing the Stanford-Binet, the Goddard versions of the Binet test were too difficult at their upper end and incorrectly identified as feeble-minded at least one-half of persons who scored in the low normal range on the newer, standardized test

(Terman and Knollin, 1915). Also, the highest grade moron sample--presumably the most important group to be called to the attention of the public because they were the hardest to detect--consisted of only five individuals found to have a measured mental age of 11 and seven others with a mental age of 12. In discussing individuals of this level it is important to recall that the average mental age of army recruits tested in World War I was claimed to be 13, and that fully one-fourth of the soldiers tested were found to have a mental age of eleven or less (Goddard, 1920). Thus, at least half, and probably more of Goddards morons would be considered of normal intelligence by today's standards.

Goddard's attempts to validate his classifications are also suspect. He asked institution workers to compare their observations of the inmates' behavior with the mental test scores. Goddard claimed near unanimity of those scores with staff evaluations of inmates mental standing relative to one another. He stated "that there was no exception to be made to the grouping as determined by the tests" (Goddard, 1910, p. 19). This is hard to accept because mental tests are far from perfectly correlated with judgments of social competence (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1964). That is, persons with similar IQ scores are always to some degree heterogeneous with regard to social adaptation (Doll and McKay, 1937, Edgerton, 1963). The complete unanimity reported by Goddard is highly implausible.

Significantly, Goddard validated his findings against the older classification of the moral imbecile. He reported that 23 persons who were previously identified as moral imbeciles scored in the moron range. According to Goddard:

> I believe that this is not accidental, but is one more confirmation of the accuracy of the Binet classification...Those instincts that lead the child to become what we loosely call a moral imbecile, ripen about the age of nine years; now if a child is arrested in his development at just about that time then he is a liar, a thief, a sex pervert, or whatever else he may be, because those instincts are strong in him, having already come to full maturity, and the reasoning power, the judgment, those faculties or processes which lead him to learn to control those instincts have never developed, and cannot. Had he been arrested in his development a year or two sooner, he would not have been a moral imbecile because the instincts that lead to it had not developed. On the other hand, had his arrest been delayed for two or three years, he would have developed sufficient reasoning power to enable him to overcome and control those instincts, and so again he would not have been a moral imbecile, but the arrest coming at just that critical period of nine, we find him with all those tendencies exceedingly strong and no power of control.

(pp. 29-30).

Goddard's remarks are significant not only because of their explicit linkage of the moral imbecile with the moron, but because they show the crucial role that social judgments played in the birth of educable mental retardation. Members of the psuedonymous Kallikak family, made famous by Goddard two years later Goddard, 1912), were assigned mental levels based on observations of behavior or second hand reports of behavior. Social deviance, of itself, was assumed by Goddard and his co-workers to prove the existence of mental deficiency (Hoffman, 1975). In using the moral imbecile to validate the new classification Goddard indicated that the ultimate criterion for high grade mental deficiency was not performance on academic and other cognitive tasks but a judgment about what constitutes appropriate social behavior. Mental tests were seen as useful because it was believed that they were so highly correlated with social behavior. Indeed, some workers suggested eliminating the term "mental defective" and replacing it with "social inefficient" (Berry and Gordon, 1931).

The notion of moral imbecility was clearly doomed by the advent of mental testing. The criteria for identifying moral imbeciles were increasingly seen as overly loose and unreliable and the classification was used less and less after 1910. The concept of a difficult to identify mildly mentally deficient individual who was responsible for many social problems did not disappear immediately however. As we have seen, the discovery

of the "moron" moved that concept to higher and more respectable scientific ground.

Pseudo-feeblemindedness

Later attempts to validate educable mental retardation as social incompetence that is due to mental deficiency foundered on the limited social predictability of intelligence tests (Clausen, 1967). Despite the optimism of early mental testers, it became apparent over time that intelligence test scores and social competence do not always overlap. Baller (1936) followed 200 individuals who had been labeled mentally retarded on the basis of their test scores as children in Lincoln, Nebraska. When studied in their twenties the subjects social adaptation appeared remarkably similar to unlabeled persons. Charles (1953) followed the same group in their fifties and found that their range of occupations covered all ten categories in the Dictionary of Occupation Titles. Again, the group seemed similar to the population in general. Differences observed in the labeled group included slightly lower marriage rates, higher death rates by violence and more males who had gotten into trouble with the law.

The second world war proved convincingly that there was an error at the root of the conception of the moron. Although one authority predicted that morons could offer little to the war effort (Doll, 1944) several reports documented the social adaptation of high grade mental "defectives" to new demands. Hubbell (1945) provided a case history of a diagnosed imbecile

with I.Q. of 48 who thrived in the Army and was promoted to Private First Class. The soldier had served in four Pacific campaigns and had received a Presidential Citation. Eighty-eight percent of a group of 100 former residents of the Wayne County Training School were judged to be competent servicemen and 31 percent of the group had received promotions (Haskell and Strauss, 1943). Workers at the Elwyn institution reported that 86 percent of a sample of their former inmates were successful soldiers (Whitney and MacIntyre, 1944). A larger study with a more representative sample found that 56 percent of 8,000 "mental defectives", the majority of whom had IQ's below 75, performed satisfactorily in the military (Weaver, 1946). Personality factors, and not intelligence, were seen as responsible for the difficulties of the other 44 percent. The Army concluded that persons with a tested mental age of eight years old could perform adequately (Scheerenberger, 1983). And although the Navy believed that almost all of its jobs called for a degree of initiative and intelligence, it found that persons testing at ten and a half-years or higher in mental ability could become sailors (Hunt, Wittson and Jackson, 1944).

It became apparent that many persons who had been previously seen as mentally deficient were socially competent under the new wartime conditions. In the depression ridden economy of the 1930's there may have been an incentive to label some socially marginal and unemployed persons as feeble-minded. The demands of an all out war in the forties, however, required

new sources of manpower both at home and in the war zone. Thus, there was an incentive to identify the socially marginal as normal. The Navy decided that only a small percentage (15 to 20%) of those failing its mental tests were actually feeble-minded (Hunt, Wittson and Jackson, 1944). Most of the others were described as educationally or culturally handicapped individuals who could still be of use in the war effort. Doll (1944), noting that changed social conditions had resulted in enhanced status for previously "defective" individuals, predicted that those "who may be socially successful today as a result of the critical shortage of civilian manpower will presumably quickly be shuffled back to poverty and dependency when the war is over" (p. 67).

Flushed with patriotism, the directors of institutions overlooked the ludicrousness of the situation that had developed. Yepsen (1945), for example wrote that

> We have once again found that the subnormal child need not be the ineffective adult. He is serving his country well in the theaters of war, in the factories, on the farms, and on the home front. Many institutions proudly display service flags with blue and gold stars upon them--they also hang in the special schools--but more important--they hang in the windows of many homes across this nation. (p. 292).

Thus, some special educators initially took credit for the surprising competence of their former inmates (Whitney and

McIntyre, 1944). They saw the social success of their former charges as due to the excellent training they had received in the institutions. Other, more critical thinkers, realized that such conspicuous success was also an embarassment. Since the time of Goddard it had often been argued that feeble-mindedness was an incurable, lifelong condition. The social competence of previously labeled defectives challenged the construct itself.

After the war Doll (1947) argued that clinicians had been mistaking "intellectually retarded" children for truly feeble-minded ones. He recognized that Goddard's founding assumption about the high grade mental deficient was no longer defensible--social incompetence could not be assumed from a measurement of mental incompetence. Social competence would have to be assessed separately to validate a diagnosis of feeble-mindedness. Social normality thus remained the standard against which mild intellectual subnormality would be validated.

To help resolve the discrepancy between the classification's definition and the demonstrations of normality by diagnosed "defectives" a new diagnostic category was suggested by some--"pseudo-feeblemindedness" (Arthur, 1947; Kanner, 1948). The pseudo-feebleminded person was one whose low score on the IQ test was due to some other cause than a defect in general intelligence. Arthur, the term's originator, was involved in certifying institutionalized persons as "normal" or "feeble-minded" as they approached the age of 21. She noted how inadequate the Binet test alone was for this task in a statement

that illustrates how subjective judgments of social normality were:

> The boy who is a steady worker, gets along with other people, has made school progress according to his abilities, "has a girl" rather than "chases girls," and helps to maintain an orderly program is safe to try in a supervised environment outside the institution, while another boy with a Binet I.Q. 15 points higher but a low rating on the non-verbal scale required such constant supervision to keep him out of trouble that no one would expect him to manage himself or his affairs with ordinary prudence in any type of environment. (p. 139)

Kanner (1948) refined the argument, positing the existence of absolute, relative and apparent types of feeble-mindedness. The "absolutely" feeble-minded were those whose defects were so severe that they would stand out in any society. The "relatively" feeble-minded were not truly mentally defective but only unable to meet the intellectual requirements of a complex society. They could, however be successful farmhands or garbagepersons. The "apparently" feeble-minded group were not mentally deficient either. Their limited mental performance was due to other factors unrelated to mental defect.

Kanner believed that his tripartite classification could salvage the post-war definitional confusion in the field of mental deficiency. Such a system would still identify as

feeble-minded "a substantial portion of the population" (p. 394) but be more defensible. Presumably, measures of social competence would determine which level of feeble-mindedness an individual would belong to. Those who were found to be mentally deficient, yet socially competent could still be treated by special educators as constituting the "pseudo-feeble-minded."

Maladaptive Behavior

The failure of intelligence tests to validate social judgments made the creation of valid measures of social competence imperative. A committee of the American Association on Mental Deficiency was convened in 1952 to formulate a new definition of mental retardation. The committee's recommendations, which were finally adapted by the Association in 1961, redefined mental retardation as sub-average general intellectual functioning that was associated with an impairment in adaptive behavior (Scheerenberger, 1983, p. 218). According to the new definition a low score on a mental test, in itself, constituted insufficient evidence to identify an individual as retarded. Thus, by specifying separate indices of both cognitive and social incompetence, the AAMD hoped to resolve the problem of "pseudo-feeble-mindedness." This change, however, created a new set of problems related to the definition and measurement of social competence.

The best known measure of social competence in the early 1960's was the Vineland Social Maturity Scale (Doll, 1936) which includes items at its upper level such as "Has a job or

continues schooling", "Contributes to social welfare", "Inspires confidence", "Promotes civic progress", and "Contributes to general welfare" (p. 287). These items illustrate the subjectivity with which social competence is defined.

The newer construct of adaptive behavior has not resolved this problem, and, perhaps, has added to it (Clausen, 1967; Coulter & Morrow, 1978; Futterman & Arndt, 1983; Rozkowski & Bean, 1980; Zigler, Balla & Hodapp, 1984). It is still unclear exactly what measures of adaptive behavior are tapping. It is also uncertain whether adaptive behavior scales should emphasize the measurement of cognitive or social competencies (Coulter & Morrow, 1978; Kazimour & Reschly, 1981). When adaptive behavior is defined in terms of independent living skills that include such things as language development, numbers and time, and economic activity it is fairly strongly correlated with IQ scores (in the range of .70), but if it is defined in terms of interpersonal conduct, the correlation drops to .22 (Roszkowski & Bean, 1980). Depending on the scale that is used, adaptive behavior is either unrelated (Mercer, 1979), slightly related or strongly related to IQ measurements (Roszkowski & Bean, 1980).

Moreover, the only measure of adaptive behavior that has been designed with different norms for children from different ethnic and social backgrounds, the Adaptive Behavior Inventory for Children (ABIC; Mercer, 1979), is almost orthogonal to standard measurements of academic competence (Mercer, 1979; Kazimour & Reschly, 1979). The use of the ABIC in conjunction

with mental tests would thus lead to a virtual elimination of the diagnosis of mild mental retardation (Kazimour & Reschly, 1981).

These problems have led for a call to a return to a more stringent and purely psychometric definition of mental retardation (Zigler, Balla & Hodapp, 1984). The argument is made that this type of standard will remove the fuzziness associated with adaptive behavior. Flynn (1985) has shown, however, that standard deviations on the Wechsler Intelligence Tests are no longer accurate due to shifts in the population which have occured since the last norming of the tests. According to Flynn, test results may be overly lenient by as much as one whole standard deviation. Thus neither the psychometric definition alone, nor the psychometric standard combined with measures of social competence promises to offer a simple solution to the problem of defining and identifying educable mental retardation.

Educable mental retardation and poverty

But while a consensus has been unattainable regarding the nature of mild mental handicap, there is little mystery about who is likely to be labeled educably mentally retarded. The mild retardates today, as the moral imbeciles at the turn of the century, are drawn from economically marginal backgrounds (Braginsky & Braginsky, 1971; Dunn, 1968; Edgerton, 1975; Ford, Mongon & Whelan, 1982; Stein & Susser, 1963; Tomlinson, 1981). It is also well known that ethnic minorities, especially blacks,

are overrepresented in American programs for EMR students (Finn, 1982; Franks, 1971; General Accounting Office, 1981; Hurley, 1969; Mercer, 1973).

A recent study (Gelb and Mizokawa, in press) examined the relationships between social demographic variables and prevalence in eight special education classifications at the state level. Only two classifications, EMR and learning disabilities, showed significant associations with social variables. Almost seventy five percent of the variance in EMR prevalence was predictable by socioeconomic indicators. EMR prevalence was positively correlated with the percentage of black school enrollees (.66), the numbers of children living below the federal poverty line (.64) and rates of infant mortality (.71); it was negatively correlated with per capita income (-.60). Most importantly, there were no similar linkages between the social variables and prevalence in special education classifications that describe children with organic impairments (visual impairment, hearing impairment, orthopedically impaired and multihandicapped). EMR, far more than learning disabilities, is yoked to the social context in which it is identified (Gelb & Mizokawa, in press).

Surprisingly, the nationwide associations found for EMR prevalence did not apply in Washington, DC. The rates for infant mortality, black school enrollment and children living below poverty are all the highest or among the highest in the nation there, yet, for the school year examined (1978-1979),

Washington, DC, had the lowest incidence of EMR in the nation. The social context of Washington, DC is distinct from the states because it alone has a sizable black majority. This factor is apparently responsible for the large discrepancy between the low EMR prevalence rate for black youth in Washington, DC and the very high rates in nearby southern states (Finn, 1982). The existence of such a contextual effect is more solid evidence that what is called educable mental retardation is socially constructed.

Conclusion

Kanner (1948) commented that "it does seem strange that after nearly a century of scientific occupation with 'feeble-mindedness' those best informed should still be wondering what they have been, and are, dealing with" (p. 367). Apparently, this is still the case. The confusion about the nature of mild mental defectiveness has persisted since the late nineteenth century. The moral imbecile was assumed to be mentally defective because of the exhibition of socially deviant behavior. Conversely, the moron was assumed to be socially deviant due to mental incompetence that could be identified on a mental test. Thus, at the inception of the modern notion of mild retardation there was no clear distinction between social and cognitive criteria for adducing subnormality.

To Goddard social and intellectual competence were congruent. An early differentiation was made by Terman (1919) who wrote that "these two criteria, the psychological and the

social, cannot be used interchangeably for the reason that ability to get on in the world depends upon many things besides absolute mental capacity..." (pp. 127-128). Still, Terman argued that persons who tested in the feeble-minded range would have a social prognosis that would be "anything but favorable" (p. 128).

The social success of "feeble-minded" individuals during World War II showed that both Terman and Goddard had been wrong. It was not safe to assume that a person with an IQ in the moron range was socially maladept. Accordingly, retardation was eventually redefined to include evidence of sub-normal functioning in both the social and the cognitive spheres. The new definition, however, has bogged down in the subjectivity of defining social competence.

The Soviet neurolinguist Luria (1963) claimed that the western concept of mental retardation is an ideological fabrication that serves economic and political interests. According to Luria, mental retardation does not exist in the absence of organic impairment of the brain. The discrepancy between eastern and western conceptions of retardation was noted by Robinson (1976) who visited the People's Republic of China and observed that mild mental retardation did not constitute a problem there. She found that translators were unable to make sense of her questions about the condition.

Squibb (1981) argued for a structural sociological analysis of special education that would relate its

classifications to the larger social systems of which it is a part. The history of EMR argues for the usefulness of such an approach. A conflict existed at the turn of the century between the Protestant work ethic which stated that hard work would be rewarded by success, and the reality of limited opportunity for advancement for most factory workers (Marks, 1982). The idea of innate mental superiority and inferiority provided a legitimating rationale for large discrepancies in income distribution which existed in the absence of differences in actual effort expended to make a living. The establishment of philanthropic foundations by wealthy industrialists to provide support for Eugenic and individual difference research concerned with feeble-mindedness as an entity was clearly in their own best interest (Fine & Mehler, 1980; Marks, 1982). Moreover, the idea of the social menace of the moron co-existed with the Red Scare following World War I. It was convenient for defenders of the social order to see radicals as mental degenerates (Goddard, 1920). Terman (1919), for example, saw the feeble-minded swelling "the army of Bolshevik discontents" (p. 285). The discovery of the mild mental retardate thus influenced the political thought of the time. A result was a diminution in American optimism about the potential of democracy and the possibility of perfecting the future. As Parrington (1930) put it:

> In the light of realistic psychology, with its discovery of morons, and its study of mob tendencies,

> it was no longer possible to take seriously that attractive figment of the romantic imagination--man in the state of nature, perfectible by folowing the light of reason, seeking justice. Morons do not fit nicely into the older theory--they jar one's faith in human perfectibility. In the light of intelligence tests perhaps the whole romantic theory of democracy was only a will-o'-the wisp. (p .xxviii)

The existence of the moron thus provided support for the existing order and discouragement to reformers.

Mildly retarded people are drawn from poor, economically "surplus" groups (Braginsky and Braginsky, 1971). They are frequently rejected children from marginal, abusive families with few resources available for childrearing. It can be argued that the child's "defect" is at least partially related to the socioeconomic system which has led to the plight of their parents. As we have noted, changed social conditions during World War II resulted in changed status for many previously marginal persons.

Alternatively, it has been argued that inner deficits are responsible for most economic marginality. For example, Goodenough (1926), in an argument later echoed by Jensen (1969), wrote that people make slums and not vice-versa. Discussions about the validity or invalidity of educable mental retardation are ultimately related to Goodenough's argument, since EMR, alone among special education classifications, is so closely

linked to economic conditions. Thus, mild mental subnormality is a political as much as a scientific issue.

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